

The grizzly death of King Thurman in 1915 reminds author of his own narrow escape

by Gary Titus

The sudden appearance of a large grizzly and her newborn cub turned an early summer hike into a hike for survival. It all started one cloudy day, June 13, 2001. As a reward for a long day of working on my cabin at Twin Lakes across Cook Inlet, my companion and I were enjoying a day of hiking and watching Dall sheep. The climb up the mountain behind the cabin started on an old hunting trail, now seldom used by hunters but mostly traveled by game animals, was uneventful.

We stopped several times to look over the beautiful Twin Lakes region and to glass for Dall sheep and other game then we continued our hike to a high peak. The winds picked up and threatened to blow us off the mountain so after a quick lunch and a few photographs, we started our journey down the route we had come up.

Reaching timberline, we stopped to change into lighter clothing and to admire a waterfall before continuing onward after a few more photographs. We threw on our daypacks and started down a steep section, when a large grizzly and her newborn cub suddenly appeared. That day, we entered the books of those mauled by bears. While we survived the mauling in the wilderness with the aid of friends and medivac helicopter, the continuing story of King Thurman is a tale of someone who was not so lucky.

My last article about King Thurman (Refuge Notebook 3/21/2008) ended with him spending 50 days in the Seward jail for poaching a cow moose; the year was 1913. To refresh your memory I will recap the highlights of that story.

King Thurman was a trapper and prospector living in the mountains of the Kenai Peninsula where he hardly ever went unarmed. He was somewhat of a hermit, like many of his kind, and apparently did not care for the company of his fellows. He preferred to live alone. His trap line was in the western flanks of the Chugach Mountains and the Chickaloon region, where he had several cabins. When he was not in the mountains pursuing gold and game, he spent his time closer to civilization at his cabin on the Kenai River

near present day Cooper Landing.

The cabin on the Kenai River was where Thurman had come under the close observation by the Peninsula game wardens over the years. Here he had gained the reputation as the worst game violator on the Kenai. Now you would think King Thurman would have seen the problems of violating the law after a summer in jail and maybe he had. The wardens did not think so. Warden J. Tolman wrote the Governor the following; "Thurman and his Partner Kulin belong to a gang of no good scrubs who have a red flag floating over their cabins, you will most likely be kept in touch with him as long as he stays in the country for there is no doubt but he will continue his violations."

Now Thurman must have mended his ways, or maybe just became more careful hiding his poaching, because the next we heard of him was in 1915. The headlines of the *Seward Weekly Gateway* on January 29, 1915 read; "BELIEVES THURMAN WAS KILLED BY BEAR." There are many accounts written in newspapers, books, and magazines regarding the mauling of Thurman, all recount the mauling differently. Here I will tell the story as it could have happened.

In the summer of 1914, Thurman had been packing supplies in to his mine and stopped at the Cooper Creek Mine on the banks of the Kenai River to visit with big game guide Ben Sweezy. King told Ben of a grizzly bear near his cabin that he had passed on shooting, as the summer bearskin was no good. King went on to say he had a queer feeling it was a mistake not shooting that bear and that he might regret it later. Sweezy told him he had been in the woods too long, and it was time to go to town and be around people. Thurman, preferring his time alone, continued on to his mine where he kept busy building a boat, tending a garden, cutting wood, prospecting, trapping and hunting.

A fellow trapper went looking for King in late July of 1915 and grew concerned when he was unable to locate him. After looking for several weeks, he returned to Seward and reported his belief that a bear had killed Thurman.

Thurman remained missing for several more months until two trappers happened upon a cabin on Rat Creek and decided to look at it with the mind to spend the night. On entering, they saw the body of Thurman lying in a bed. The remains were in horrible condition; the whole right side was torn and chewed up; the left hip, and right arm and calf of the right leg were also chewed up. At his side was a twenty-two caliber revolver with one fired shell in the chamber. His rifle was in the cabin, fully loaded, and outside the cabin was a water bucket punctured with teeth marks.

In the cabin, a diary was found with the last entry made on Saturday, July 25, 1914, and stated; "Came to Flat Cabin." On his body was a paper dated July 26, 1914 and read; "To whom it may concern, this camp outfit belongs to the undersigned, Please do not take it and disappoint the owner, King D. Thurmond." Below this were these words, apparently added later; "Have ben tore up by a brown bear. No show to get out. Good-bye. I'm sane but have to sufering the of death."

Thurman must have realized that he was beyond all medical aid, being a great distance from any help

and to end his misery, he shot himself. The cabin was his funeral pyre since his remains were in no condition to move. Today we know the stream flowing out of Trout Lake as Thurman Creek. Thurman knew it as Rat Creek, and it was there he died regretting that he had not shot that bear.

While King Thurman may have regretted not shooting the bear that mauled him, I had several times seen the bear that subsequently mauled me. I have even seen it since, but I have never regretted not shooting it.

Gary Titus has been the Backcountry Ranger, Cabin Manager, and Historian at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, since 2000. In spite of bear trouble, Gary thoroughly enjoys flying over to his remote cabin on Twin Lakes, where he was neighbor of the late Richard Proenneke, author of "One Man's Wilderness: An Alaskan Odyssey Book." Gary is the coauthor with Catherine Cassidy of "Alaska's No.1 Guide: The History and Journals of Andrew Berg 1869-1939." Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.